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James P. Steyer  
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JUNE 14 1994

JUNE 14, 1994

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Secretary  
Federal Communications Commission  
1919 M Street, NW  
Washington, D.C. 20554

To Whom It May Concern:

Enclosed please find one original plus nine copies of the testimony of Mr. James P. Steyer, to be presented to the Commission June 28, 1994, with regard to the children's television programming inquiry, MM Docket # 93-48. Also enclosed are ten copies each of three different reports we would like attached to the testimony as background for the Commissioners. These reports are:

Children and the News Media: A Children Now Special Report  
Tuned In Or Tuned Out? America's Children Speak Out on the News Media  
The News Media's Picture of Children

If you have any questions about this material, please contact me at 510-763-2444.

Thank you very much.

Sincerely,

Vicky Rideout

Vicky Rideout  
Director,  
Special Projects

No. of Copies rec'd  
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**TESTIMONY OF JAMES P. STEYER  
PRESIDENT, CHILDREN NOW**

**BEFORE THE  
FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION**

**HEARINGS ON  
THE CHILDREN'S TELEVISION ACT**

**JUNE 28, 1994**

Mr. Chairman, Commissioners: Good morning. My name is Jim Steyer, and I am the Founder and President of Children Now, one of the nation's leading nonpartisan children's policy and media organizations.

When the Children's Television Act was first passed, offering a strict definition of "educational or informational" programming seemed unnecessary. But since then, we've seen that one person's silly cartoon can be another person's educational program. And that's why we're here this morning.

The time has come for the FCC to offer new rules or a new policy statement revising current guidelines. If problems persist despite those new guidelines, the FCC should consider appointing an educational committee to review contested submissions.

The FCC's guidelines should begin by laying out examples of the kinds of programming content that will clearly and unambiguously meet the criteria of the Act. One example that we believe the Commission should encourage is news and current affairs shows for kids.

Access to timely, high quality news and information programming about current events is vital to the social and political development of children. That need is not currently being met.

Earlier this year, Children Now convened a major national conference of leading academics, children's experts and news media leaders at Stanford University, on the issue of children and the news media. We conducted a national poll of young people regarding their use of the media, as well as a substantive content analysis of how the adult news covers children. We discovered from kids themselves that when children

are forced to turn to the adult news for their information, it often has a detrimental effect on them, creating fear, anger and depression among many young people. We also found that the mainstream news media does not sufficiently address children's need or desire for information on the issues that most concern them. One of the key conclusions of the conference was that children ought to have the option of watching news programs designed specifically for them.

There is some programming that meets this need today, but not very much. The networks have sponsored specials for children about current affairs, but no ongoing news for kids is available there. Last year, ABC announced that they hoped to have such a program on the air in this fall's lineup. That lineup was recently released, and no such show was included. The two standouts in kids' news are on cable: Linda Ellerbee's Nick News and CNN's Real News For Kids -- the latter of which has just been cancelled by the Turner Broadcasting System. Clearly, broadcasters need to do more.

A second kind of television show that would clearly qualify as educational are shows designed primarily to enhance children's "cognitive" abilities. Shows that help teach kids to read or to count, that teach children geography, math or science, would clearly fulfill the goals of the Children's Television Act.

Programs that are specifically designed for kids and that contribute to their "affective" learning are important and valuable as well, but it is here that children's advocates, the FCC and broadcasters run into trouble, and it is here where this Commission will need to offer clear guidance. "Affective" education teaches children values and behavior. Obviously, there are many of us here this morning who feel that a lot of what is on television today runs the risk of teaching children negative values and behavior -- condoning the use of violence, promoting sexual or racial stereotypes. At the same time, many programs also offer positive role models for young people, and broadcasters deserve credit for those shows. The question is whether they deserve that credit under the Children's Television Act.

Current guidelines state that any program designed for children which furthers either their "cognitive/intellectual" or "social/emotional development" qualifies under the core programming requirements. These guidelines need to be tightened. New guidelines should not rule out any particular television format, such as animation,

drama, or even comedy. But the critical point is that new guidelines must require that any program submitted under the core requirement serve a primarily educational purpose.

Finally, a few remarks to those here today representing the television broadcast industry. The access you have to our children's hearts and minds is unprecedented, and the power of your influence is enormous. We all know that television can be just a time-filler for kids, and in some cases can actually have a detrimental impact. But we also know something else very important about television. Television can be a very powerful tool for learning.

Today, with the Children's Television Act, those of you in the broadcast industry have the power to dramatically recast the role of television in children's lives. So I urge you: fill your entertainment programming for kids with positive, prosocial messages -- yes. But do much more. Turn the incredible pool of talent at your disposal to an indisputably positive goal: the education of our children. Ignite an explosion of innovative, creative, truly educational programming. Go beyond what will just get you by with the FCC. Step up to the plate and make a real difference for kids. All of our futures depend on it.

Thank you very much.

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## CHILDREN and the NEWS MEDIA

A Children Now Special Report

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May, 1994

Dear Friends,

*In early March, 1994, we were privileged to host the National Conference on Children and the News Media at Stanford University. Our co-hosts were Stanford University and the UCLA Center for Communication Policy. This landmark event brought together many of the nation's top reporters, news executives, media critics and children's advocates to examine the impact of the news media on the lives of kids.*

*The conference sessions focused on a series of key questions:*

**Is the news media's coverage of violence excessive, or does the news merely reflect reality? ♦ What is the impact of this violence on kids? ♦ How can we encourage more quality news programs directed at kids? ♦ How can we encourage more substantive coverage of important kids' issues that are often overlooked by the news media?**

*First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton's thoughtful and detailed address to the conference, delivered live via interactive satellite, indicated that careful attention is being paid to these critical issues at the very highest levels of government.*

*This report is meant to help continue the debate and inspire action. One thing that became clear to us during the conference is how much one person can do to turn the tide: one enterprising journalist, one determined advocate, one committed news executive can make a difference.*

*Speaking of making a difference, we are very pleased to be able to report that three of the children who participated in the conference, Shauntia Graham, Shaunnah Ray and Connie Llamas, have joined the Children's Express news bureau in Oakland, California, and will soon be beginning their own careers as journalists.*

*We hope you enjoy this report, and we look forward to hearing your thoughts.*

**James P. Steyer**  
Founder & President  
Children Now

**Donald Kennedy**  
Board Chair  
Children Now

**Geoffrey Cowan**  
Founding Board Member  
Children Now

## Children and the News Media



# Bang-Bang & Blood: Violence In The News

**S**ex and violence. Add children to the tired old formula, and you have the news story of the 90s. Gone are the days when the press relegated kids to winning spelling bees or popping into the world as quintuplets. Today the media treats young people much the same way it treats other people: as victims or villains. Advocates for children begged last year for more coverage of crucial issues like health and welfare. What they got instead was a numbing procession of stories about teens killing teens, a tattooed kidnapper killing a girl, rich brothers killing their parents, and an inferno killing young cult members in Waco. Just to mention a few gory highlights.

It remains to be seen whether such coverage actually increases criminal behavior in juveniles. But what is obvious is that sensational stories boost media ratings — and fear and anxiety among young people. A recent Children Now poll of 850 youngsters across the country found that over half of them reported feeling afraid, depressed or angry after watching or reading the news. And no wonder. Look at the news through a child's eyes. There is a bogeyman who eats kids up; he lives in Milwaukee. Priests are perverts. Gunmen kill students in

school. Slumber parties aren't safe. As kids grow older they tune out a society depicted mostly at its worst. Adults tune *them* out. "The image you get of kids in the news is cross the street if you see one coming," said Washington Post reporter Juan Williams.



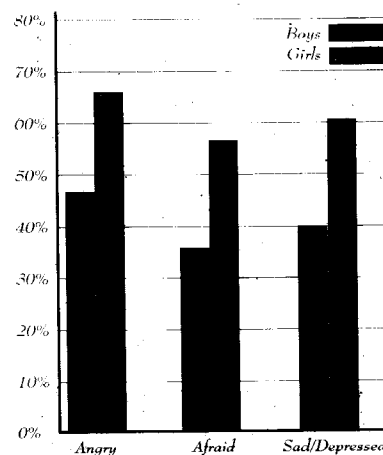
**Juan Williams**  
Washington Post Reporter

Journalists are in the business of covering reality, aren't they? And reality is not child-proof, particularly in a world where an average of 13 children die from shootings every day and even shopping mall Santas receive death threats. Moreover, in the hallowed interest of a free and fair press, journalists are trained not to treat anybody differently. "Kids are just

part of a huge audience that feels misrepresented by the press," said Van Gordon Sauter, president of Fox News. "Our job is to present the news. We can't be forums for every group trying to help everyone," said Walter Goodman, television critic for The New York Times.

Such talk about duty and objectivity, however, clashes with the way the press is doing its job. The number of crime stories doubled on the networks last year, even though national crime rates remained the same. And while crime among juveniles is on the rise, it is overplayed. A Children Now study found that nearly half of news stories about children depicted them as victims or perpetrators of crime, while fewer than four

**DOES THE NEWS MAKE YOU FEEL...**  
(% saying yes)



**Murder**



percent touched on their economic woes. With 14 million American children living in poverty, even a rookie reporter can see that the media is missing the real story. The reason is simple: violence sells. These days, with growing competition from cable, "television is more desperate than ever to pander to the basest instincts of its audience: anything with bang-bang and blood," said veteran newsman Daniel Schorr.

Competitive pressures and deadlines are toughest at the local TV news stations. Producers at the national networks are doing a better job of attempting to make news programs what Patrick M. Roddy, an executive producer at ABC News, called "family-safe." When Roddy produced Good Morning America, he looked through footage of the bombing of Baghdad and weeded out the most gruesome shots. "I don't want any piece of video going on the air that isn't acceptable for a mother with a nine year-old and a baby to watch at the breakfast table," he said. Other broadcasters, however, are reluctant to follow suit. Creating news fit to be seen by a 13 year-old, Sauter said, would be "commercially disastrous."

Even journalists agreed that coverage of crime is superficial. "The media does a very bad job of telling the whole story," said Narda Zacchino, associate editor of the Los Angeles Times. Take gang violence. The press missed this story for years — maybe because the teens dying were poor, black or Latino. Now that kids killing kids makes a hot topic, too many reporters

cover the mounting toll of deaths without delving into the root causes. Once neglected, inner-city youths are now a one-dimensional crime story. More than 73 percent of African-American children polled agreed that whenever they see African-American and Latino people in the news they are usually involved in crime, drugs or some other problem. That is one reason

Carole Simpson, an ABC anchor, goes out of her way to include positive anecdotes about minority children in her reports.

Our parents sat in movie theaters and watched news reels of waving soldiers in jeeps during World War II — today's children sit in living rooms and watch dead American soldiers dragged through the dusty streets of Mogadishu. Parents have little control over the immediate and relentless parade of violence beamed into their children's homes.

But reporters can provide children hope for resolving problems. "We need to take it a step further. What are the positive stories we can tell?" asked Milli Martinez, executive producer at KABC TV in Los Angeles. Shauntia Graham, 11, sees plenty of violence on the streets around him. He wants news about a different kind of world. "I don't just wanna see another kid dying for drugs," Shauntia said. "I wanna know that kids are gonna live to see a better tomorrow." After all, sometimes people really do live happily ever after. Kids need to see that on the news, too.



**Patrick M. Roddy,**  
**Executive Producer ABC News**

#### **KIDS OF COLOR TRUST OPRAH**

*Kids of color tend to trust Oprah, Donahue and other daytime talk shows more than TV news, perhaps because these shows feature kids as guests and explore issues such as drugs, AIDS and gangs. Over a third of all African-American children say that daytime talk shows do the best job of covering kids their age, a higher rating than they give any other news source. (Only a quarter of white kids feel that way.)*

*According to the poll conducted by Paul Maslin, African-American children are highly critical of how the media depicts people of color and covers their neighborhoods.*

## A Future Philosopher

**S**hauntia Graham knows a lot for an eleven year old. He's bright, confident and knows how to ask adults tough questions. He also knows how to hit the ground when he hears gunfire near his Oakland apartment, because children get shot if they're in the way. He has no interest in girls, *like that*, but just in case he knows how to use the condom his mom gave him. He knows some people think the odds are against a young black male from the inner-city like him, but he's gonna keep on winning baseball medals and writing poetry anyway.

*My school windows are covered with plastic and bars so you need a sledgehammer to get out. There's a crack house on my corner and drug dealers selling stuff to people in cars. I see people gambling and shooting. One night I heard a hundred shots outside my window. I didn't get to see the body but I saw the blood. When I went to the corner store with my sister these guys ran in and pulled another guy out. They were beating him with sticks and poles. There was blood everywhere. He died. I saw people get hit with bats and stuff and more murders. It's very similar to what's on TV news, except this is real.*

*But you know, they don't tell on TV what's the good things. They show a black person or a Latino shootin' because that's what gets sky high ratings but they don't show it if somebody of color achieves something. It makes me feel discriminated against.*

*How come black kids never get kidnapped like Polly Klaas? Maybe nobody wants us... If there WAS a black Polly Klaas, would she be on TV? I don't think so.*

*Lots of kids I know are saying when they grow up they wanna be a gangster, they want to shoot people like on TV. Not me. That's immature. My role model is sports like Michael Jordan. I'm going to be an athlete. If I hurt my knee or something, why then I'll be a philosopher.*



## Calling All News Media: Children's Issues Are Important Too

**T**here's a media war being waged. But it's not over circulation or advertisers. It's about saving the nation's children. In Chicago, both papers are



Van Gordon Sauter, President of Fox News

crusading against the murder of children. Across the country, over 30 newspapers and TV stations have created a children's beat and Time and Newsweek are suddenly putting kids' issues on the cover. "It's time for journalists to come out of their protective shells," says Dennis Britton, editor of the Chicago Sun-Times.

Some reporters are actually breaking out of that protective pack. They are tackling more complex stories and exposing the real roots of the crises facing kids. As Britton reminds us, "A lot of this is about poverty. It's about racism. It's about our society not

working." Some reporters are taking an unorthodox approach. They report as teams and are not afraid to pommel their readers not just with one front page story, but with an endless series. The Detroit Free Press' "Children First" project, the Arizona Republic's "Saving Arizona's Children" and ABC's "American Agenda" all challenge their public to think more deeply about policy. "The media is forming a real attention span about these issues," said Cathy Trost, director of the Casey Journalism Center at the University of Maryland. Like Walter Cronkite announcing the daily body count of the Vietnam War on CBS every night, "it's in your face," says Trost. The images, of course, are even more potent when they're on the tube. "The role of the media is to

focus on the darkest corners of our society, where the biggest problems are, to create a sense of outrage so people are galvanized into action," says Andrew Heyward, executive producer of "Eye to Eye with Connie Chung."

In reality, most news stories don't move people to act. Or even to think. While many in

### CROSSING THE LINE: JOURNALISTS AS ADVOCATES

**A** reporter's greatest fear seems to be crossing the line between us and them, even when covering children and the effect of policies on their future. But a new breed of journalists argues that it is imperative that reporters start to act as advocates for a population that often has no other voice:

**"We're not at all objective about children, especially children in the inner city. We've done everything we can to pommel readers with stories about children."** F. Richard Ciccone, managing editor of the Chicago Tribune.

**"The job of TV news is not to represent people, but to report on them."** Van Gordon Sauter, president of Fox News.

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the news media are sounding the public alarm about kids and violence, other issues of public policy — even when they affect kids — are often ignored. In fact, 48 percent of all television stories and 40 percent of all newspaper stories about kids concern crime, according to a recent Children Now analysis. The study found that only one story in three had anything to do with policy. Even fewer stories — one in four — were actually centered on policy. And only 2 percent of all the stories dealt with kids in poverty, even though 70 percent of those on welfare are children. “If we do our jobs well, we should be framing policy for people,” says John DeNatale, senior producer at the MacNeil/Lehrer News Hour. “But if you dropped someone from Mars and you told

them there is a crisis that has to do with children and let them figure out what it is, they would say it involves a woman named Tonya and a woman named Nancy.”

The key to writing about policy issues is to make them as interesting as the Tonya-Nancy feud. And it can be done. A Los Angeles Times series exploding the myths about welfare cast it as



**Angela Glover Blackwell,**  
**Urban Strategies Council**

a children's issue and helped defeat a California initiative that would have imposed severe cuts. And in Kentucky, a year-long series on children's issues so inflamed the public and lawmakers that they pushed through systemic educational reform. At its best, the media does influence policy. Reporters mold beliefs when the public has none. For instance, the press created such an ideal image of Head Start that recent research indicating some quality problems in the program hardly put a dent in its public persona. On the other hand, the

media's preoccupation with crack babies led many in the public to focus on crack as the only explanation for infant mortality. To many, it seemed fruitless to support prenatal care or other efforts to prevent infant mortality. In that instance, the media's intense focus on crack eclipsed attention on other important issues. “The press can play a negative and destructive role,” says Children Now executive director Lois Salisbury. “It took years to rehabilitate pre-natal care.”

Part of the problem is that the press is quick to jump on a sensational story and loath to examine its policy implications. That kind of in-depth reporting involves cutting through red tape. Figuring out who is to blame. Weighing apples and oranges. For instance, if reported well, a story on California's new “Three Strikes” crime bill would point out that its \$5.7 billion

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*“We can't be a forum for every group trying to help everyone. Our job is to present the news. It's very dangerous to move in the other direction.” Walter Goodman, television critic of The New York Times.*

*“In New York City, people used to ask themselves, ‘Is it good for the Jews?’ As journalists, let's ask ourselves, ‘Is it good for the kids?’ That question has to be asked again and again and again.” Peter Schrag, editorial page editor of the Sacramento Bee.*

*“There's this misconception that news is a holy mission. Think of it as a product on the marketplace.” Daniel Schorr, senior news analyst, National Public Radio.*

annual operating cost could more than pay for the nation's entire Head Start program. Even more difficult is finding the right visual elements to illustrate such a policy story. "Most stories on policy don't work well on TV," says Heyward. "Those stories are 'Newsac': they go in one ear and out the other."



Carole Simpson,  
ABC News

Those stories also take a lot of work and are difficult to sell to editors. Children's issues — like women's issues — are still considered soft news. To get good play, all too often reporters would rather regurgitate the rhetoric they are fed by politicians. They also feel more comfortable holding individuals solely responsible for tragic situations than acknowledging the role economics and institutions play. "The media are lazy and don't do a terribly good job," says Heyward. Advocates need to do a better job too. They have to find stories that are emblematic of issues, because, as Heyward says, "stories are the currency news people deal in, not issues. Advocates need to be more imaginative." And if they were? Would the media really respond? "I get a sense of no risk-taking," counters Salisbury, "because of your quarterly stockholders reports."

#### TEN MOST WANTED

Call it an advocate's "wish list." Or *Mission Impossible*. Impossible only because these kinds of stories — the ones advocates consider the ten most under-reported stories about kids — challenge the media to redefine what is seen as newsworthy.

1. Kids Without Health Care. How kids are hurting and how they will be affected by the Clinton Plan and other proposals.
2. How Kids Learn. How the challenge of reform should be, and is, transforming what happens for kids in the classroom.
3. Stressed Out At Six Months or Six Years. What's a day like for the child whose parent is juggling work, housework and "quality family time?"
4. Learn To Be a Real Criminal in Juvenile Jail. How the juvenile correctional system perpetuates child abuse and ends up being the best training ground for criminals.
5. Can Mom Afford to Work? Can She Afford Not To? The struggles of working poor families on the border of economic viability and how those struggles affect kids. The inadequate supply of childcare options for mothers who need or want to work.
6. Child-Friendly Urban Planning. Do urban planners or businesses think much about kids when they decide to build housing, relocate offices and plants, or plan mass transit?
7. Racial and Sexual Stereotypes. The gender gap and race gap are alive and well in the media and the classroom.
8. Dad, I Just Threw Up. How does a working family cope when a child is sick?
9. Poverty Is a Children's Issue. Seventy percent of those on welfare are children. How does an unwillingness to contend with adults' economic situations affect kids?
10. How We Treat the Most Important People. Teachers, child care workers and pediatricians are all underpaid and treated with less respect than other professionals, including dog catchers. How much do we invest in those who care for our kids compared to other nations and other cultures?

## Not A Stereotype

**Karen Chan, 13, lives on the edge of Oakland's Chinatown. The eighth-grader works as a waitress on weekends at her parents' restaurant. To her, a kid who is beaten up is just "another statistic." In her racially-mixed junior high-school, where cliques dominate, she considers herself a loner and likes "people who defy stereotypes."**

*I see violence around me. We actually run to see someone shoot someone. Today after school two guys were arguing over a dice game and one guy was drunk and pulled a gun to shoot the other for one dollar. So you see 50 kids running toward the bus stop to see if he actually shot the guy. It's kinda stupid. They don't think about it. Basically, it's just entertainment like on TV.*

*We can see someone get beat up and not care and only look out of curiosity. It's just another statistic. The media care more about statistics than the people behind the statistics. I'd like to see that mentality change.*

*The last time I was really scared was in 7th grade. [Only a year ago.] I got jumped by two girls. I was afraid to go out of my home even. At some point I decided I'd rather be numb than scared. If I stay numb I don't have to feel pain. The only bad side of it is how people see me.*

*I watch local news. Network news isn't too interesting. I don't care about what is going on in other countries. My peers don't talk about world news. My big gripe is, I don't see any Asian women in the media. You never see them in Forbes among the top ten millionaires. The news media only portray violence or the upper class. You don't see Asian women in either because of the stereotype that they are smart, passive people. I have no idea what Asians in this country are doing. The news is still dominated by white males making decisions or crime-filled inner-city action.*



## No Regular Journalist

**W**hat with band, ballet, cheerleading, and speech contests, Shaunnah Ray is too busy for the news. Shaunnah, 13, shares an Oakland apartment with her mother, sister, niece and nephew; other relatives live next door. The Rays look out for each other. Shaunnah wonders why she doesn't see more people like her family in the news. Probably because most kids like her never had the chance to become reporters.

*I don't like to practice the violin. My mom likes me to do it. She's the kind of person who says if you start something you just can't stop it in the middle. My mom comes home real tired. She's using her last bit of energy for me. My sister's going to school and starting a singing career. I watch my little niece and nephew after school. We can't play outside. 'Cause of all the violence. My ma, she's strict in that. She doesn't want me to get hurt or kidnapped. But it's still a cool place to live.*

*They tell the truth on the news but they focus on the violence more than they do on the positive things that happen in the community. What I want to know, is, do they look for the violence or do they look for the positive stuff?*

*Some people just see one side of the picture. They see a bunch of kids walking around and think they're rowdy. They think I'm just a little black girl. I don't really actually kinda care. I may look like a normal kid, you know, with a baggy t-shirt and tattoos on my pants, but I already know I'm gonna make something of myself. I have won many gold medals. I just wrote a paper on teenage pregnancy and it was extremely good.*

*I want to be a pediatrician or a journalist. But not a regular journalist, looking stuff up in books, covering violence. That's not exciting. You always know what's gonna be on — just killing. I want to do something MEANINGFUL. Where my reporting really helps somebody.*



## All The News That's Fit...For Kids

**H**ow do you tell young viewers about a particularly cruel war that is slaughtering children just like them? Nick News, a syndicated TV show for kids, showed a young schoolgirl reading excerpts from her diary of life during the brutal siege of Sarajevo. Not one dead body was shown, but the ten minute segment told the tragic story so well grown-up observers cried. "This is the hardest work I've ever done," said Linda Ellerbee, producer of Nick News. "You do it very much the way you do programs for adults, but you do it better."



**Shauntia Graham, 5th grader at the Cox School in Oakland, California**

One of the many fallacies of the news business is that making news for kids is child's-play. In fact, kids' news requires the detail, context and sensitivity that many people think is sorely missing from adult news. "Kids

are not couch potatoes," said John C. Wright, professor of psychology and communication studies at the University of Kansas. "They are working very hard to understand the story, and they need as much help as they can get." But too many kids agree with Justin Van Den Berg, 15, that "programming is forced and pathetic, like Barney the Dinosaur." Only a third of preteens polled by Children Now watch news shows for children, and their number decreases as they grow older. "What's missing in children's programming is enough diversity," said Peggy Charren, founder of Action for Children's Television. "It's like a library with just comic books."

The potential for an educational return is obvious. What's often lacking is a ratings return that guarantees commitment from broadcasters and editors. "These shows didn't make as much money as GI Joe and they will never be as popular as the cartoons," Ellerbee said. Today networks host occasional prime time specials for children. ABC's special with President Clinton attracted more than twice as many viewers than did the mighty Ninja Turtles. But there is a vacuum of regular news and information shows. One recent study found that 60 percent of the shows slated for children in response to a new federal law aired between 5:30 and 7 a.m., presumably because that's when the networks lose the fewest advertisers and viewers. "The market does not work for kids," said Kathryn Montgomery, president of the Center for Media Education.

Newspapers, alarmed by the steep decline in readership





**Justin Van Den Berg,**  
**Children's Express**

due to TV, are doing better. The number of papers featuring kids' sections has grown from a handful five years ago to an estimated thirty or so. Rumor has it that even the stodgy New York Times has been inquiring about launching a section for youths. Editors see these pages as a way to defer what many fear is almost certain extinction. "It's not driven by altruism but by the market," said Washington Post reporter Juan Williams.

Although such work is still in its infancy, an interesting debate is emerging among those who produce news for children over just how much reality to feed them. "We have to step back and see what value it really has," said Jay Suber, a CNN vice president in charge of Real News for Kids. On one side are those who believe children cannot understand and should therefore be shielded from certain kinds of news. On the other side are those who believe that kids can deal with virtually any kind of news — if it is done well

enough. The Chicago Tribune's weekly KidNews section pulls no punches, as evinced by a page headed Tough News. Stories have touched on everything from genital mutilation to parental sexual abuse. "We are not an educational supplement. We are a newspaper, and our job is to present the same news that will be in the A section," said the Tribune's KidNews editor Stephen Cvengros.

News does not have to be entertaining to hook children, it just has to be darn good. And it has to provide balance. That is critical when the news is sad or violent. Nearly twenty years ago Mr. Rogers produced a groundbreaking special for preschoolers on assassinations. ABC recently produced a special on the Gulf War for similar reasons: "Kids were scared," said ABC producer Pat Roddy. News about even horrific events, when done well, can comfort children by helping them to understand their world. "It takes an entire community to raise a child. The media is part of that community, too," said David V.B. Britt, president of the Children's Television Workshop. The good news is that more journalists are starting to agree. The bad news is that more need to.

#### **PRODUCING NEWS FOR KIDS: DO'S AND DONT'S**

**Don't** report about playdough. *Do* track the dough in Whitewater.

**Don't** call the news segment "Immigration." *Do* call it "Who Owns America?"

**Don't** show dead bodies in disasters. *Do* show rescues.

**Don't** talk down to kids. *Do* remember how smart they are.

**Don't** use the word Mogadishu without showing where it is. *Do* use maps.

**Don't** just focus on a pool of blood. *Do* show the bigger socio-economic picture.

**Don't** be sensational. *Do* encourage young people to get involved and confront decision-makers.

## It Could Be Me

Madeleine Bair, 11, lives with both her parents and her older brother Jonathon, a true pest and pal, in a new development among the grassy hills of Pinole, California. Madeleine enjoys what the media might describe as an "old-fashioned, idyllic American childhood." She works hard at school. For fun, she rides her pink mountain bike around the block and swims in her family's pool under a lemon tree. So far about her worst battles have been with Bach, on the piano. For Madeleine, the news is a scary but revealing peek at an entirely different world from hers.

*I've always been kinda paranoid of, like, not a monster or anything, but of a person in my closet. I always look in there and make sure the door's all the way shut before I go to bed. I had nightmares because of all the stories about the kidnapping. I made sure the lights were on before I went upstairs and that nobody was there. I also checked behind the doors and under my bed and stuff. I mean, Polly Klaas was just this young innocent girl who was kidnapped right out of her house and her parents didn't even know why. It could have been anybody. It could be me.*

*My dad doesn't want me watching the news because it's so violent. If he sees me watching TV he'll find some excuse like I have to do the chores or my homework. I read the papers a lot. They have more positive stories in them. I like stories about things I'm interested in. I also like articles that are about people like what I am.*

*I'm Jewish, and I just read this story about these boys that were killed because they were Jews. I didn't like what the story was about. But I think it's important to know what is happening. I feel that it's just, like, a terrible thing these people killing each other, or bombing a school for no reason. Or if it's a reason it's because of who they are and what they look like. I just hope that the news will be better when I grow up.*

*I want to help people. I've always wanted to be a brain surgeon. It would be, like, interesting to look inside people's brains, to see what color they are. I also dream of being a drummer. But I don't have any drums.*

TALK  
HOW

TO  
a



## No T.V. Thoughts

**A**t 18, Luis Cruz is already a seasoned journalist. A freshman at the University of California Berkeley, he is one of four host reporters on the weekly show "Straight Talk 'N Teens," where he wants to use "the tremendous power of the media to do good." He tries to make each segment "thought provoking" and believes the program's success is due to the fact that the teen hosts have "real thoughts, not TV thoughts."

*My parents are from Mexico and I was raised on Spanish programming. There is only one Spanish station and it is local. It focuses on what's going on in the community and does a good job, winning a lot of awards. When I used to watch it, it concentrated on what's going on in the community: education, health, and sports. People watched these shows. Maybe Anglo media could learn something from them.*

**A**dult reporters can be insensitive to kids and not respect them. So kids are intimidated and pretend not to care. Some reporters may not think kids are as important as adults. They don't give kids credit for how smart they are. As a reporter, I make the kids I interview feel that they have a voice and can make a difference. They don't hold back. They have nothing to hide.

**I** think TV news can be powerful. It can make kids believe that what they see is the truth. For instance, being a Latino, you always see Latinos getting into trouble. And you start to believe there's no one out there doing any good. Your self esteem is low and now you have an excuse for causing havoc, namely that everyone else in your race is portrayed on TV as doing wrong.

**A**s a reporter, you have to pay attention to how you word things. There's a lot of racial bias. There have to be more minority producers calling the shots.

**I** know in the news business, it's hard to be objective. I think you can also be an advocate. You can do a lot of good. You can produce shows that are thought-provoking, like ours, and get people to think. That's really TV's role, to be used as a resource in the discussion of issues.



## Where We Go From Here

**S**o, what did we learn from this summit meeting of high-powered media moguls? A working group of attendees helped formulate the following ideas.

First, there seemed to be an overwhelming willingness on the part of all the participants to re-examine the way we both cover news about kids and create news products — be they print or electronic — for a kids audience.

To first address the issue of the ways children's issues are covered, it became quite clear that kids are watching newscasts that are primarily designed for adults and reading newspapers geared to an adult audience. Editors must become acutely aware of this and add an additional measurement to their decision-making process that addresses fundamental fairness in the coverage of kids.

♦ **The media should ensure diversity of staff at the decision-making levels and include minority kids and community kids in the news-gathering process. This will help ensure that the media does not promulgate racism and stereotyping in its portrayal of kids' issues.**



Linda Ellerbee,  
Lucky Duck Productions

♦ **Newsroom managers must make a special effort to make news more understandable to children. Media must work harder to put stories into context. Managers should try to create a "child-safe" news product, assuming there may not be a parent present when kids are seeing news.**

♦ **Local TV stations might consider following the lead of Sacramento's KXTV, and other stations, and refuse to air violent video during the early evening newscasts when kids might be watching.**

It was suggested that parents be told how to become more responsible in monitoring news on behalf of their children.

♦ **Teach parents how to better monitor the news through the eyes of their children and encourage them to write or call news outlets about their complaints or concerns.**

♦ **If parents' concerns aren't addressed, they should boycott news or infotainment shows that use excessive violence. The news is a product, and right now violence sells.**

On the topic of developing an audience of children,

there was emphatic input from the children attending the conference, and supported by the results from the surveys that had been conducted for the conference, that kids are seeing or reading about themselves in negative terms, and like other critics of the media, ask that there be more emphasis on the positive.

♦ **Kids do not wish to be primarily portrayed in stories dealing with violence, guns or drugs. Negative coverage perpetuates hopelessness and alienation.**

♦ **Bring kids into the news-gathering process through the schools, communities, or local television.**

♦ **Perhaps the Children's Television Act should specify the need for news programs designed for the youth audience.**

♦ **Teach kids how to contact the media.**

♦ **Develop full media literacy programs in the schools.**

♦ **Set up kid roundtables.**

To expand coverage of important children's issues, news executives, reporters and advocates all have to do their part.

♦ **News outlets should reduce the proportion of their reporting on crime, and invest the time in substantive coverage of other equally important issues.**

♦ **Advocates need to help package information about kids, and give reporters enough lead time to do a good job.**

It was generally agreed that the print media is doing a better job at this point in time in reaching kids and understanding the children's market. There was a strong feeling among the attendees that this conference served a valuable purpose, if only as a consciousness raising exercise.

On the subject of next steps, it was suggested that Children Now might conduct further surveys of parents regarding news coverage of violence and how it is affecting their kids. Children Now might poll kids on an annual basis to test their reaction to news. Children Now might sponsor an annual awards banquet to honor media for their outstanding coverage of children's issues and for innovative approaches to reaching this audience.

We will continue to play a watchdog role of pricking the conscience of the media and look for practical solutions to improving the quality of the relationships between "Children and the News Media."



#### **FIRST LADY**

#### **HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON:**

*I know that journalists need to treat their subjects as objectively as they can, but I think that sometimes subjectivity, remembering what it's like to be a child or a parent raising children, is probably okay too.*

*When violence is newsworthy enough to be reported, it should be balanced with stories that provide children with positive images of themselves and those around them. After all, good judgment and caution, or prudence, do not violate the journalist's first amendment rights. But good judgment and caution and prudence do and can make a difference to children.*

## Acknowledgements

**Production of this report and of the National Conference on Children and the News Media were made possible only by the extraordinary support, generosity and vision of the following foundations: The Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Miriam and Peter Haas Fund, and the Bettingen Corporation. These foundations are not responsible for the statements or views expressed in this report.**

**Additional support for the National Conference on Children and the News Media was provided by the Kaiser Family Foundation, the Lucile Salter Packard Children's Hospital, and the PBN Company of San Francisco.**

## Children Now

Children Now is a nonpartisan policy and advocacy organization for children.

Children Now acts as a strong and independent voice for the millions of children who cannot speak for themselves in the public policy arena, in the mass media and in the community. We focus particular attention on children who are poor or at-risk.

Children Now:

- \* *Educates the public and decision makers about the needs of children;*
- \* *Develops and promotes effective strategies to improve their lives;*
- \* *Generates new resources for cost-effective programs that benefit children and families;*
- \* *Reaches out to parents and children to inform them of opportunities to help themselves.*

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